Obituary

Alfred Jules Ayer (1910–1989)

by John G. Slater

I

I HAPPENED TO be in London on 27 June 1989 when A.J. Ayer died, and I made a point of collecting the obituaries that were published in the newspapers.[1] As I expected, there was quite a splash of publicity: BBC Radio assembled a panel of his friends to discuss his life and work, and most of the serious newspapers announced his death on their front pages. Despite his notoriety none of the tabloids took any notice of his passing. *The Times*, in an unsigned obituary (their usual practice), noted:

> Ayer was not a major philosopher like Russell or Wittgenstein, or even, perhaps, like Popper and Ryle. But he was a very able philosopher indeed, endowed with particularly sparkling intellectual gifts, an admirable if slightly chilly prose style and unflagging energy. As a philosophical teacher and influence there is no one to compare with him since Russell and Moore.

Michael Dummett, writing in the same newspaper, stated that "in his lifetime [Ayer] was by far the best-known living British professional philosopher", and he went on to offer an evaluation of Ayer's teaching:

> He made a great professor; opinionated and prejudiced, he never attempted, as did both Ryle and Austin, to impose his opinions on others, whether students or colleagues. Extremely clever and agile in discussion, what he admired in others was cleverness, which he fostered without concern for whether they agreed with him.

The Independent, the new London daily which has set out to replace *The Times* as *the* newspaper of record and seems to many people to be succeeding, gave Richard Wollheim space on its front page to praise Ayer as a philosopher and intellectual. After calling him "one of the foremost philosophers of his day" he proceeded to describe the sort of philosopher he was:

> As significant as Ayer's philosophy was the kind of philosopher that he was. Fundamentally he believed that philosophy was a profound part of human culture. In this way he was an intellectual in the European sense. But he thought that the diffusion of philosophy did not require a diminution either in rigour or in ambition. No philosophical view, he always thought, was worth more than the arguments that could be brought forward in its favour. And no philosophical view could be of interest unless it could be generalized into a principle.

In his obituary in the same newspaper John Foster led off by saying that

> A.J. Ayer was the most important British philosopher of his generation. Indeed, among twentieth-century British philosophers, he ranks second only to Russell.

That remark would have pleased Ayer, since he ended the first volume of his autobiography, *Part of My Life*, which took him up to his thirty-fifth birthday, in this way:

> What I have achieved since is for others to estimate, but if I could be thought even to have played Horatio to Russell's Hamlet, I should consider it glory enough.[2]

Sir Peter Strawson, in an obituary for *The Guardian*, judged Ayer to be "the most celebrated British philosopher of his generation", but added that "his lasting reputation will rest upon his strictly philosophical publications." He then contrasted Ayer's written and oral styles.

> The regular and even tenor of Ayer's writings, philosophical and autobiographical, is in contrast with the style of his unstudied speech and of his life. The former had an impulsiveness, even an explosiveness, which reflected the extreme quickness of his mind and his impatience with any thing that struck him as obscurantist or as otherwise wrong-headed. His life reflected a need for stimulation and applause which nevertheless co-existed with a considerable objectivity about his own achievements, talents and personality.
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> He was vain, but not conceited. He had great powers of enjoyment and great vitality. He was completely without pretence. Thrice married,[3] he neither concealed nor paraded his taste for amorous adventure.
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> He faced death with the imperturbability which he admired in Hume (and

1 Unless otherwise noted, the quotations are from newspapers that appeared on 29 June 1989.

2 London: Collins, 1977, p. 312.

3 Actually four times. Late in life he remarried his second wife.

which so shocked Boswell).

Apropos of his amorous adventures, a columnist in *The Guardian* reported that Ayer "once said that his chief regret in life was that he had not had enough sex." And Geoffrey Wheatcroft, a long-time cricket friend, writing for *The Sunday Telegraph*, reported a rather astonishing fact: "His amorous life was the object of some awe as well as fascination. Can the figure of 150 women that he recently mentioned in an interview be true? Yes, quite possibly it could" (2 July 1989).

These samples will give the reader some idea of the press coverage at the time of his death. Before I turn to a short summary of his life and work, I would like to mention two other press matters. The first comes from a short tribute in *The Observer* by Ted Honderich. He depicts Ayer's last days:

> He died as cheerfully as he could, and wrote spirited messages on his clipboard when he could not speak. It was not his fame that endeared him to the nurses of the intensive care unit at the University College Hospital. When he came towards the end he did not give in, and managed that old bright smile for friends. He was in no danger of succumbing to nonsense. (2 July 1989)

Honderich's last sentence is almost certainly an allusion to Ayer's article, "What I Saw When I Was Dead", published in *The Sunday Telegraph* for 28 August 1988. The event which occasioned the article was his eating smoked salmon while confined to a hospital bed with pneumonia and having it go down the wrong way. The drastic consequence was that his heart stopped beating for four minutes. During this interval Ayer had a memorable experience:

> The only memory that I have of an experience, closely encompassing my death, is very vivid.
>
> I was confronted by a red light, exceedingly bright, and also very painful even when I turned away from it. I was aware that this light was responsible for the government of the universe. Among its ministers were two creatures who had been put in charge of space.
>
> These ministers periodically inspected space; and had recently carried out such an inspection. They had, however, failed to do their work properly, with the result that space, like a badly fitting jigsaw puzzle, was slightly out of joint.
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> A further consequence was that the laws of nature had ceased to function as they should. I felt that it was up to me to put things right. I also had the motive of finding a way to extinguish the painful light. I assumed that it was signalling that space was awry and that it would switch itself off when order was restored.
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> Unfortunately, I had no idea where the guardians of space had gone and feared that even if I found them I should not be able to communicate with them.
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> It then occurred to me that whereas, until the present century, physicists accepted the Newtonian severance of space and time, it had become customary, since the vindication of Einstein's general theory of relativity, to treat space-time as a single whole. Accordingly, I thought that I could cure space by operating on time.
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> I was vaguely aware that the ministers who had been given charge of time were in my neighbourhood and I proceeded to hail them. I was again frustrated. Either they did not hear me, or they chose to ignore me, or they did not understand me. I then hit upon the expedient of walking up and down, waving my watch, in the hope of drawing attention not to my watch itself but to the time which it measured. This elicited no response. I became more desperate, until the experience came to an end.
>
> This experience could well have been delusive.

He concludes the article in this way:

> My recent experiences have slightly weakened my conviction that my genuine death, which is due fairly soon, will be the end of me, though I continue to hope that it will be. They have not weakened my conviction that there is no god. I trust that my remaining an atheist will allay the anxieties of my fellow supporters of the Humanist Association, the Rationalist Press, and the South Place Ethical Society.

As might be expected, this piece occasioned a great deal of talk when it appeared, and many who commented upon his passing referred to it.[4]

The other press matter to which I shall call attention is an unpleasant one. Three days after Ayer's death, Robert Jackson, the sitting Minister for Higher Education in the Thatcher government, published a letter in *The Independent*:

> I guess it was only to be expected that one of Sir A.J. Ayer's academic obituarists should remark, as does Professor Richard Wollheim, upon the contrast between today's supposed intellectual ice-age and "the days when British life was still permeable to wide-ranging, free-floating argument, which endured until the late 1970s."
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> Equally, it is to be expected that those of this opinion will overlook the irony of such a contrast when it refers to a philosopher whose main work enormously narrowed the range of philosophical inquiry, and who taught, in Richard Wollheim's own words, that "all other thinking ... religion, ethics, metaphysics ... is literally meaningless ... nonsense."

4 So much talk, in fact, that Ayer felt obliged to reply to his critics in an article, "Postscript to a Postmortem", in *The Spectator* (15 Oct. 1988). His belief that there was no life after death had not been weakened, he explained, but only his "inflexible attitude towards that belief". The most probable explanation of his experience, he went on to say, was that his brain was not dead, a point, he confessed, he had not made sufficiently plain in his original article.

> Wollheim's contrast between today's intellectual climate and that of Ayer's heyday is not as he thinks, one between breadth, pluralism and openness on the one hand, and narrowness and dishonesty in argument on the other. His is the voice, rather, of a dethroned hegemony—dethroned largely because of the poverty and superficiality of its thinking. (30 June 1989)

Jackson's rather tasteless attack on Ayer drew angry replies from G.R. Grice, Simon Blackburn, and Ronald Dworkin, and it was replied to in full by Lady Ayer at the memorial service held for her husband on 12 December.[5] Jackson's letter was the only sour note in what was otherwise a hymn of praise for a life well spent.

II

Alfred Jules Ayer was born on 29 October 1910 in London. His father was Swiss and his mother Dutch. His mother was born a Jew, but she did not practise the Jewish religion. Alfred was baptized into the Church of England, but, since his parents never attended church, his connection with the Church was purely nominal. His mother did teach him to pray, a practice he continued until he was twelve.

> I had a utilitarian attitude to prayer, and came to doubt its efficacy when it failed to get me into the cricket eleven of my preparatory school. (*Part of My Life*, pp. 16–17)

By an odd stroke of luck he won a scholarship to Eton, which he wanted to decline, but which his family insisted he take up. He did well enough there to win, at sixteen, one of three open scholarships in classics that Christ Church, Oxford, awarded. At Oxford he concentrated on philosophy and ancient history. Gilbert Ryle and Michael Foster were his philosophy tutors. Ryle especially took a great interest in his work, and it was through him that he was introduced to Wittgenstein and later to members of the Vienna Circle. Based largely upon the marks he received on his papers in ancient history, he was awarded a First Class degree and was appointed a research lecturer in Christ Church. He was only twenty-one years old. His family had wanted him to become a barrister, but this appointment ended talk of that career. Ryle suggested to him that he spend a year in Vienna attending meetings of the Vienna Circle. Even though he did not know German he decided to act upon this recommendation. One gets the impression in reading Ayer's autobiography that the direction in which his career developed was often determined by the suggestions of others.

Before he went to Vienna he was invited to read his first philosophical paper outside Oxford. Wittgenstein and Braithwaite asked him to address a meeting of the Moral Science Club in Cambridge. At dinner, before the meeting, he sat opposite John Maynard Keynes, who unnerved him by saying nothing after a curt greeting. Those in the audience for his talk included, besides Wittgenstein and Braithwaite, G.E. Moore and C.D. Broad. Broad took him to task for defending the thesis that generalizations of scientific laws were rules, not propositions, but Wittgenstein and Braithwaite came to his defence. Moore did not take a leading part in the discussion, but he looked benevolent, which Ayer found comforting (*ibid.*, pp. 124–5).

The fact that he was only learning German during his year in Vienna effectively prevented him from being much more that a spectator at meetings of the Vienna Circle. But Quine was there that year too, and he knew German, so Ayer was able to benefit from the sessions by discussing them with Quine. When he returned to Oxford he had no definite plan for research. Isaiah Berlin, after hearing him talk with gusto about his Vienna experiences, suggested that he write a book about logical positivism before he lost his enthusiasm for it. Through a woman friend Ayer obtained a letter of introduction to Victor Gollancz, went to see him in his offices, and came away with a book contract. When the manuscript was delivered some eighteen months later Gollancz was sorry he had signed the contract, but he published the book anyway, and found to his surprise that he had something of a bestseller on his lists. Ayer completed the book just before his twenty-fifth birthday. *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) is definitely a young man's book, and should be read by students of philosophy when they are very young. Moreover they should begin with the book proper, and not with the Introduction to the second edition, which has a terribly dampening effect on the book as a whole. The bravado of the opening sentences can still make the young heart beat a little faster:

> The traditional disputes of philosophers are, for the most part, as unwarranted as they are unfruitful. The surest way to end them is to establish beyond question what should be the purpose and method of a philosophical enquiry. And this is by no means so difficult a task as the history of philosophy would lead one to suppose. For if there are any questions which science leaves it to philosophy to answer, a straightforward process of elimination must lead to their discovery.[6]

The publication of this book did not endear Ayer to the older generation of Oxford philosophers. Instead of taking off, as he hoped it would, his career languished. Part of the reason, of course, was that he found it impossible to come up with a theme for a second book which would top the one just published.

5 *The Independent*, 16 Dec. 1989.

6 London: Victor Gollancz, 1946 (1st ed., 1936), p. 33.

Then the war came and he joined the services and did very little work on philosophy throughout the duration of the war. His second book, *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, was published in 1940, shortly after the war started; it deals with the problem of our knowledge of the external world. During his military service his talents were never properly used, in part because he was unable to suffer fools respectfully. After the war he found himself regarded as an elder statesman in philosophy instead of a radical young Turk. In his autobiography he laments this transition, remarking that he had passed from the one state to the other without ever enjoying the plenitude of power.

He returned to Oxford having been elected to a tutorial fellowship in Wadham College. At the end of the first academic year he was invited to apply for election to the Grote Professorship of the Philosophy of Mind and Logic in University College, London, and he decided to do so because "I liked the idea of becoming a professor, and I thought that I should prefer living in London to living in Oxford" (*Part of My Life*, pp. 308). The selection committee, after lengthy deliberation, chose him over Louis Arnauld Reid, an older man whose special interests in philosophy were very different from Ayer's. Philosophy in University College had been allowed to nearly fade away. There was only one other qualified teacher in the department and he spent as much of his time as possible in France; the department had only two small offices allocated for its use. Ayer set about rebuilding the department, and it must be said that he did a splendid job of it. Among those he enticed to London were Stuart Hampshire and Richard Wollheim.

In 1958 H.H. Price resigned the Wykeham Professorship of Logic in Oxford University, and Ayer decided to apply for election as his successor. Bertrand Russell and Isaiah Berlin were amongst his referees. The selection committee had seven members, five of whom were philosophers: Anthony Quinton, Gilbert Ryle, J.L. Austin, J.D. Mabbott, and as outside member, John Wisdom from Cambridge. On the first ballot Ayer received three votes, those of Quinton, Wisdom, and the Warden of New College, where the professorship is based. Ryle and Mabbott voted for W.C. Kneale, and Austin for Strawson. The President of Magdalen, representing the Vice-Chancellor on the committee, decided to make it a majority for Ayer by casting his vote for him. Those opposed to Ayer's selection vigorously opposed this move, but their protestations came to naught.[7] So Ayer went up to Oxford with some of its leading philosophers opposed to his coming. With his work cut out for him, he entered into Oxford life with, if possible, even more than his usual energy. He threw himself into organizing opportunities for the discussion of philosophy. One such group, by invitation only, still flourishes. Nearly everyone came to see that the selection committee had made a good choice, except possibly Austin. When Austin died, one unkind undergraduate put it about that he had died of "Ayer in the bloodstream". Ayer served as Wykeham Professor for twenty years, retiring in 1978.

7 *More of My Life* (London: Collins, 1984), pp. 161–2.

Throughout his London and Oxford periods he continued to write philosophical books and articles, as well as an enormous amount of popular journalism, mostly book reviews. He participated in many discussion panels on both radio and television. For several years he was a regular member of the Brains Trust, a popular television programme, which made him known to nearly everyone in Britain. The prospects of the Labour Party also consumed a lot of his energy; he was once so close to the centre of power in the Party that he was invited to participate in its final televised appeal for votes before a general election. Service on various commissions and committees commanded much of his time, and one of them, on elementary education, earned him his knighthood. It was awarded in the New Year's list of 1970, and it posed a problem for Ayer. Protocol requires that the title "Sir" be followed by a first name. "Sir A.J. Ayer" is not therefore possible, but he had never used his first name, having always been called "Freddie" by family and friends. A columnist in *The Evening Standard* (5 Jan. 1970) helped him agonize over what style to adopt. Deciding that "Sir Freddie" would sound somewhat odd, he reluctantly concluded that he would have to be styled "Sir Alfred Ayer".

Ayer's first contact with Russell's views came when he was eighteen:

> I bought Russell's *Sceptical Essays* when it first came out in 1928, and was immediately captivated by the opening sentences: "I wish to propose for the reader's favourable consideration a doctrine which may, I fear, appear widely paradoxical and subversive. The doctrine in question is this: that it is undesirable to believe a proposition when there is no ground whatever for supposing it true." Russell went on to say that "if such an opinion became common it would completely transform our social life and political system", and then and thereafter I was disposed to think him right. (*Part of My Life*, 53–4)

Although they met from time to time during the next several years, it was not until after the Second World War that they became friends. Russell was then living in Richmond and Ayer was often in his company. To the surprise of neither of them they found they shared a similar approach to philosophical problems. In 1947 Russell began a very favourable review of the second edition of *Language, Truth and Logic* (1946) with a compliment:

> This is a delightful book, to which I can give the sincerest praise possible, namely that I should like to have written it myself when young.[8]

8 *Horizon*, 15 (Jan. 1947): 71–2.

Given the battering that Ayer's views had suffered since the book's first appearance, it is certain he would have been thrilled by Russell's endorsement.

Ayer later paid Russell the compliment of writing two books about him and modelling a third on *The Problems of Philosophy*. The first, and longer, study of Russell is in *Russell and Moore: the Analytical Heritage* (1971). Its Russell sections present quite thorough expositions and critiques of his theories of definite descriptions, logical atomism, and neutral monism. The second book appeared in the Fontana Modern Masters series and, consequently, treats of its subject's views more broadly; it even includes a chapter on Russell's moral philosophy. Both books are valuable contributions to the secondary literature on Russell. Ayer's third book is *The Central Questions of Philosophy*, published in 1973. The blurb used both on the dustwrapper and in advertisements suggests a comparison:

> Although it ranges more widely, the book invites comparison with Bertrand Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*, which was published in 1912. It is written from a similar philosophical standpoint, but it also reflects the important developments in many branches of the subject which have come about since that date.

Here is another instance of Ayer playing Horatio to Russell's Hamlet.

Ayer was involved in the Bertrand Russell Editorial Project from an early date. He accepted appointment to the Advisory Editorial Board at the start of the project, and he attended all of the meetings of that board. In 1972 he was a very lively participant in the Russell centennial celebrations held at McMaster University, reading a paper and speaking from the audience at many other sessions. From remarks he made to me and to others during those celebrations it was clear that he regarded himself as Russell's heir and defender in philosophy.

Toward the end of his life he published two volumes of autobiography, *Part of My Life* (1977) and *More of My Life* (1984). I find them curious books. The author of them seems to have no inner life. The events are described as if Ayer is writing about someone else, but then, perhaps, that is the way the autobiography of a logical positivist should be written. I am not the only one who has found the books unrevealing. Mary Warnock, reviewing the first volume in *The Sunday Telegraph* (12 June 1977), recalls that one of Peter de Vries's characters is made to say, "Deep down, I'm superficial", but she does not think this quite captures the overall impression one is left with after reading Ayer's book. She suggests that it is more accurate to ascribe to Ayer this thought: "Deep down, I'm bored." Whether this judgment is just or not is not for me to say. It is certainly true that Ayer could give the impression of being infinitely bored when he was listening to another, but when it came his turn to speak he fairly bounded to life, lavishing attention on the subject and his audience (and he did love an audience), smoking feverishly, twirling his watch-chain until you thought it would surely break, and pacing back and forth like a caged animal. It is too bad that none of this comes through in his autobiography. Because it does not, I feel sure that future generations will find it nearly impossible to understand how the author of *Part of My Life* and *More of My Life* could also have written *Language, Truth and Logic*. Perhaps Mary Warnock is right. Perhaps he was bored by the time he came to write his life. Fortunately, those of us who knew him have our vivid memories of him to cherish. He was a man worth knowing.

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